

## Controversial immunologist faces court case

Xavier Bosch *Barcelona*

Spanish immunologist Antonio Arnaiz-Villena, the author of a paper on the genetic origins of Palestinians, has been suspended without pay from the Hospital Doce de Octubre in Madrid, where he heads the department of immunology and molecular biology, after being charged with embezzlement of funds.

Dr Arnaiz-Villena, president of Spain's National Commission of Immunology, was the author of a polemical paper on the genetic origins of Palestinians that was retracted and deleted from records last autumn. In it he said that some Palestinians lived in concentration camps.

The embezzlement charges refer to Dr Arnaiz's "purchase of products not used in his department's healthcare activities; purchase of hospital products used in healthcare activities but in quantities much greater than needed; falsification of statistical data apparently to justify purchases; humiliating treatment of department staff; delay in healthcare activities; and transfer of department products to the university."

Pilar Notario, spokeswoman for the hospital, said the products referred to were mainly laboratory and immunological items, some of which were allegedly transferred without permission to the university for research purposes, resulting in delay in doing immunological tests for patients.

She said the health ministry's Social Security Investigation Group—a police body—estimates the fraud may mean the hospital has lost €860 000 (£531 000; \$756 000) over the past five years. The final figure may reach €3.9m.

In addition to the charges, Dr Arnaiz-Villena is facing allegations of "moral harassment" at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, where he chairs a research and teaching immunology unit.

Last October, the university started an internal inquiry after complaints by an associate professor at the unit, María José Recio-Hoyas, whose contract for the academic course 2001-2 was not renewed because Dr Arnaiz-Villena delivered a negative report against her. Among other things,

she told the *BMJ*, Dr Arnaiz-Villena accused her of misappropriating a DNA sequence of 930 base pairs of the DMB primate gene from his personal gene registry at the university.

Dr Arnaiz-Villena told the *BMJ* that he discovered that Dr Recio-Hoyas had registered the sequence in the gene bank database of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg, Germany, in her name without telling him. Although she acknowledged that she took the sequence (essential material for her doctoral thesis), she said that she registered it in both their names at the laboratory.

Dr Recio-Hoyas has subsequently had her contract renewed as associate professor after an investigation by the university into her complaint of moral harassment.

Dr Arnaiz-Villena denies all the charges against him. He said he is undergoing a "public lynching," which may have a political background. "I don't know whether it's just by chance, but problems started shortly after the *Human Immunology* thing," he said, referring to events surrounding publication of a paper of his last year on the genetic profile of Palestinians.

This incident, believed to be the first time a paper published in a peer reviewed biomedical journal has been retracted as a result of political comments, began when Dr Arnaiz-Villena was invited to be a guest editor of the September issue of *Human Immunology*—the official journal of the American Society for Histocompatibility and Immunogenetics. His paper examined the genetic profile of Palestinians compared with Jews and other populations in the region. The study included a summary of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which prompted ferocious complaints.

Dr Nicole Suciu-Foca, editor in chief of the journal, and Dr Robert Lewis of the society's publications committee, condemned the paper in the October issue of the journal and stated that it had been deleted from the scientific literature. At the time, Dr Arnaiz-Villena, who was fired from the journal's editorial board, apologised for any offence caused by his paper but called the unprecedented action "unwise."

Both the hospital and the university say that Dr Arnaiz-Villena's current charges have nothing to do with the *Human Immunology* affair. □

## WHO insists screening can cut breast cancer rates

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

Mammography helps to cut deaths from breast cancer in older women by about a third, agree experts assembled by the World Health Organization, hoping to put an end to the uncertainties that over the last two years have surrounded the value of screening.

The 24 experts from 11 countries, convened this month by the WHO's International Agency for Research on Cancer, dismissed the work of Danish investigators published in January 2000 and October 2001 that claimed that mammography did not save lives and could actually be harmful (*Lancet* 2000;355:129-34 and 2001;358:1340-2).

In women aged 50-69, mammography reduces the chances of dying from breast cancer by about 35%, the group estimates, although in younger women there is only a slight benefit.

The Danish researchers, who are associated with the Cochrane Collaboration, had criticised the scientific basis of many of the major trials used worldwide to support national breast cancer screening programmes. But the WHO group, which re-examined the original studies, claims that the data do provide sufficient evidence that mammography saves lives in older women.

● The National Institute for Clinical Excellence has approved the use of the drug trastuzumab (Herceptin) in combination with paclitaxel (Taxol) for women with advanced breast cancer. Taxol has been available for use on its own for this group of women for some time, but the new combination is expected to improve survival rates in women with a particularly aggressive form of breast cancer. □



Body Worlds, an exhibition of anatomical and whole body specimens, opens this week at the Atlantis Gallery, Brick Lane, London. According to the exhibition organisers, surveys have shown that 50% of visitors pay more attention to their physical health afterwards.

For opening times telephone 020 7053 0000